

Notes of Decisions Taken and Actions Required

Improvement Board

20 January 2009

Local Government House, Smith Square, London, SW1P 3HZ

Present:

Chairman Cllr David Parsons CBE (Leicestershire CC) (Con)
Vice-Chair Cllr Sir David Williams (Richmond upon Thames LB) (Lib Dem)
Deputy Chairs Cllr Dame Sally Powell DBE (Hammersmith & Fulham) (Lab)
and Cllr Ray Frost (Teignbridge) (Ind)

Conservative Cllr Peter Fleming (Sevenoaks DC); Cllr Peter Goldsworthy (Chorley BC); Cllr Jonathan Owen (East Riding of Yorkshire); Cllr Richard Stay (Bedfordshire CC) and Cllr Ken Thornber CBE (Hampshire CC).

Labour Cllr David Wilcox OBE (Derbyshire CC)

Liberal Democrat Cllr John Commons (Manchester City Council)

Apologies Cllr Christine Bowden (Newham LB); Mayor Sir Steve Bullock (LGE); Cllr Edward Lord JP (Corporation of London); Cllr Ian Swithenbank CBE (Northumberland CC); Paul Roberts (IDeA); Helen Newman (LGE); Chris Wilson (4ps);

Substitutes Cllr Ann Lucas (Coventry) and Cllr Lorna Spenceley (Harlow DC)

In attendance Lucy de Groot (IDeA); Dennis Skinner (IDeA); Jan Parkinson (LGE); Derek Allen (LACORS); Brian Standen (4ps); Stephen Jones (LGA); Annette Madden (LGA); Jo Dungey (LGA) Nick Easton (LGA); Sarah Feltham-Cheshire (LGA)

1. National Improvement and Efficiency Strategy

a) Sector Led Engagement – Feedback from the Warwick event held on 8 – 9 December 2008

Stephen Jones, Director of Finance and Performance, introduced this item, explaining that the event had been organised to provide an opportunity to consider the sector led improvement offer. This offer needs to be clearly presented to councils so that support

can be easily accessed and taken up. He drew members' attention to paragraph six of the report which highlights four areas considered critical to successful sector-led challenge and support. Lucy de Groot, IDeA Executive Director, added that further work needs to be done at a political level to develop trust, so that members are more willing to ask for help early. She also emphasised the importance of this work in the context of the transition from CPA to CAA.

Members felt that the event had been very successful and thanked officers for the excellent facilitation and venue. A member particularly welcomed the opportunity it had provided to bring officers and members together to discuss this issue.

Decisions/Actions:

The Board agreed that:

- A consultation paper be circulated in April for discussion amongst the sector, inspectorates and the government on building the future framework.

Jo Webb/Annette Madden

- The sector led framework be discussed at the Board's away day in March 2009.

Secretariat

b) RIEP Update

The Chairman updated members on his meeting with John Healey MP on 25 November. A joint letter to all RIEP lead members was drafted following the meeting and LGA is awaiting a response from CLG before sending this out. He then informed members that, following Lead Members' visit to the East Midlands RIEP, John Healey MP has approved the release of the withheld funding. The Chairman provided feedback from the second RIEP member forum. The meeting had been useful and was important in continuing the positive relationship with the minister. Cllr Parsons expressed his thanks to Cllr Stay for the support in establishing the group.

A member emphasised the importance of ensuring that RIEPs are consistently seen as cross-party and of involving councillors in all aspects of their work. It would be useful for all members of the Improvement Board to seek to be involved in RIEPs and Officers should seek ways in which members could do this.

Efficiency and Transformation Fund

A short note was tabled providing a summary of current thinking around the fund and the Chairman invited members' views.

The additional funding was welcomed, however members cautioned against allowing the administration of the fund to become overly CLG led and bureaucratic; it is important not to return to a bidding culture. A member proposed that bids be coordinated through the RIEPs, as this would rationalise the process and encourage Local Authorities to engage with their RIEP if they had not already done so.

A member expressed concerns that the relevance of this fund for district councils may be limited.

Decision/Action

- Officers to feed back views of the board in discussions with CLG.

2. **Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA)**

In the light of recent concerns from some councils, the Chairman informed the Board of a proposal to survey all member authorities' views on CAA and asked for members' views. Stephen Jones explained that this would be a poll of leaders and chief executives, seeking their views on the effectiveness of CAA; their level of confidence that it will reflect councils' leadership role and be proportionate; and their confidence that it will adequately support councils in safeguarding vulnerable groups. Members felt that this should be targeted at leaders.

The Board's Group Leaders will be meeting with the Audit Commission on 27 January and propose to highlight the importance of member engagement, particularly stressing the role that member peers should play in this assessment process, along with any other issues arising from the survey results.

Members then expressed some general concerns about the current situation regarding the development of CAA:

- Members noted that there are still too many questions that remain to be answered by the Audit Commission. In particular, the role of 'flags' needs to be addressed, not least because of the potential damage that the issuing of a 'red flag' could do.
- There are still concerns about the way that CAA will work in two-tier areas and it was far from clear that CAA would be delivered in a way that was relevant for district councils.
- There was some debate over the way in which the 'light touch' approach can be balanced with effective member engagement, but this was felt to be achievable.
- Several members raised concerns over the capacity of the inspectorates and specifically around the level of knowledge they will need in making forward looking assessments, especially in complex two-tier areas.
- Partner agencies – particularly PCTs – are likely to continue to prioritise government-directed targets above their contribution to the CAA process.
- There was concern about the need to manage the overall burden of inspection activity through effective gate-keeping by the Audit Commission.
- Members noted the confidence that the local government sector had gained from the way that improvements were clearly demonstrated by CPA. There could be serious implications for the reputation of local government if this clarity was lost through CAA.

Members stressed the importance of successfully managing the potentially difficult messages that may come out of the publication of the final CPA results, and that lead members should be involved in the management of this work.

Action:

- A survey of leaders be conducted of current views on CAA **Stephen Jones**
- Sector concerns about CAA and the forthcoming CPA results be discussed at the next Liaison meeting with the Audit Commission **Group Leaders**
- A report on the final CPA results be submitted to the next meeting of the Board,

Stephen Jones

3. Local Area Agreements

Jo Dungey, Senior Policy Consultant, introduced this report. She explained that it is a priority to ensure that local authorities are able to renegotiate targets in light of the current economic downturn. This is particularly important for the indicators relating to housing, worklessness and skills.

Several members expressed concerns over the lack of clarity regarding the terms 'community' and 'neighbourhood' used for LAAs. They questioned the deliverability of driving strategic principles down to ward level. An alternative view was expressed that the proposed work would help give greater recognition to the community champion role of ward councillors.

Members felt that the current indicator set is too large and needs to be both reduced and simplified, and it was agreed that the LGA should lobby for these changes as part of its submission on the next Spending Review.

Decisions:

The Board:

- Noted the progress on the annual review of LAAs and renegotiation of targets affected by the economic downturn;
- Supported the LGA work with the Centre for Public Scrutiny to ensure support for implementation of new powers of scrutiny of LAAs; the LGA's member representatives at CfPS could support this engagement.
- Agreed that the LGA should engage councils in work to review the National Indicator Set and lobby for changes as part of the next Spending Review, and earlier for those targets that are still not workable.
- Supported proposals for future work on developing and implementing LAAs at a district level, including examples of current good practice that would engage and support ward councillors.

Action:

- The Board authorised officers to lobby for a reduction and simplification of the Indicator Set beyond 2011.

Stephen Jones

4. Children's Services

Andrew Cozens, Strategic Advisor (IDeA), and Caroline Abrahams, Programme Director for Children and Young People, took members through this report. Andrew informed members that, despite recent headlines, the actual number of authorities rated Grade 1 or 2 for safeguarding has not changed since last year.

Given the importance of member to member support, the Board felt that the next step should be for this to be referred to the LGA Group Improvement Boards. Members noted the lessons from Haringey and, in particular, highlighted the need for immediate support to be offered to members facing a crisis situation and dealing with the media.

Several members noted the challenging environment in which social workers practice and the risk inherent in decision-making. There was agreement that the sector should be demonstrating greater support for individual practitioners. The skills, status and workload of social workers need to be addressed, particularly to encourage people into

the profession. However, this support for individuals does not mean that the sector should defend bad corporate decisions and failing councils must be challenged.

Decision:

- The Board noted the overall picture set out in the report and agreed the proposals for coordinated improvement activity by the LGA Group and key partners.

Actions:

- The Group Improvement Boards to be engaged in improvement work on children's safeguarding. **Group Leaders/Caroline Abrahams/Andrew Cozens**
- A report from the IDeA setting out the support offer to be brought to the next meeting of the Improvement Board.

Secretariat/Andrew Cozens

5. Empowerment and Redress

The Board received a presentation from David Cook, Chief Executive of Kettering BC, on a review of the feasibility and practicality of introducing and extending the idea of redress for citizens when their council services fail to meet agreed targets. The outcome of the review will be the production of a toolkit for practitioners. David thanked the LGA and IDeA for their support for this review and asked for assistance in identifying case studies and practical support with the launch.

The Chairman thanked David for the excellent presentation and several members agreed with the importance of improving customer service and mechanisms for redress.

Members made the following suggestions:

- It is important to involve councillors in this work as, through contact with residents, they are very aware of concerns regarding dealings with their council.
- There is a real need for joined-up provision of information, particularly in two-tier areas.
- It would be useful for consumer lobbying groups to be involved in this review.
- The review should link up with the LGA Customer Insight Working Group.

David Cook then highlighted:

- the need to develop the advocacy role of both front-line staff and members;
- the importance of one individual taking responsibility for a case;
- the continuing importance of face to face contact; and
- the need for greater coordination across central government in terms of the customer service expectation for local authorities, police and health services.

6. Improvement Board Away Day

Cllr John Commons updated members on progress with the away day and circulated a draft programme.

Actions:

- Members to notify officers of their availability on the proposed date; and
- Members to email Cllr Commons with suggestions of additional people to invite to the dinner.

7. Innovation conference and future improvement conferences

Members welcomed this report and suggested that future conferences should offer parallel sessions of direct relevance to members.

Councillors Peter Fleming and John Commons offered to act as a sounding board for the planning of the November event.

Decisions:

- A future two day event should be clearly identified as an Improvement Conference
- The next two day conference should be held in November 2009, subject to timing of competitor events
- The venue should be in a city-centre location outside London
- The conference should be planned and marketed to increase Councillor attendance

Members agreed that LGA/IDeA partner with the newly created Public Services Innovation Laboratory (PSIL) on innovation.

PSIL was proposed by the White Paper "Innovation Nation". It is hosted by NESTA (National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts). NESTA is keen to bring local government into its development of the Laboratory and recognizes the need for local government political support for its work.

8. Note of the last meeting – 25 November 2008

A member noted that a report on the reward grant had not been brought to this meeting and should therefore be carried forward to the March agenda. The note of the last meeting was then agreed.

It was confirmed that the Board meeting on 20 May 2009 will not be rearranged.

Date of next meeting: Tuesday 24 March 2009 at 11am, Local Government House